

# ***FISH & WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET***

**Meeting Date:** August 8, 2013

**Agenda Item:** Red Hill Road—Dry Canyon/East Fork Access Project

**Division:** Wildlife

**Action Needed:** Endorse Course of Action

**Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 5 minutes

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## **Background**

This project would secure access to Lewis and Clark National Forest (Judith Ranger District) lands in the Big Snowy Mountains in Fergus County. This is a high-use area for elk, mule deer, black bear, mountain grouse and turkey hunting opportunities. Elk are currently more than 400 percent above objective in the Snowy Elk Management Unit, mainly due to lack of hunting access. Adjacent private lands are currently outfitted or have been, or are, at risk of purchase by others who may be unwilling to allow public access. Public access to this area of the national forest is limited to a few access points via BLM land along Red Hill Road further south. These access points, however, do not provide adequate forest service access to the East Fork drainage due to steep topography south of this property. Due to land ownership along a county road and topography, this property provides the only feasible and currently available public hunting access into the East Fork drainage.

## **Public Involvement Process & Results**

An environmental assessment will be developed and subsequent public involvement solicited pending F&W Commission endorsement of this project.

## **Alternatives and Analysis**

Proposed Action: Acquire a 40 acre parcel along Red Hill Road which will provide direct public access to U.S. Forest Service lands where none presently exists. This project has been initiated by the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF). Through their due diligence they have initiated discovery and have committed to a purchase option with the private landowner. The Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation would remain a primary partner on this project. The USFS, Canyon Ferry Trust, The Mule Deer Foundation and Wild Turkey Foundation are other potential partners.

No Action: FWP would forgo the opportunity to partner with the RMEF and purchase this access. No guarantee of reasonable public access to USFS lands could be offered.

## **Agency Recommendation & Rationale**

FWP recommends the Commission's approval to proceed. This project will secure permanent public access to USFS lands in the Big Snowy Mountains where none presently exists.

## **Proposed Motion**

I move the F&W Commission endorse the recommendation to begin negotiations for acquisition of a permanent public access to USFS lands in the Big Snowy Mountains.